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When Prophecy Fails and Faith Persists: A Theoretical Overview

Lorne L. Dawson

ABSTRACT: Almost everyone in the sociology of religion is familiar with the classic 1956 study by Festinger et al. of how religious groups respond to the failure of their prophetic pronouncements. Far fewer are aware of the many other studies of a similar nature completed over the last thirty years on an array of other new religious movements. There are intriguing variations in the observations and conclusions advanced by many of these studies, as well as some surprising commonalities. This paper offers a systematic overview of these variations and commonalities with an eye to developing a more comprehensive and critical perspective on this complex issue. An analysis is provided of the adaptive strategies of groups faced with a failure of prophecy and the conditions affecting the nature and relative success of these strategies. In the end, it is argued, the discussion would benefit from a conceptual reorientation away from the specifics of the theory of cognitive dissonance, as formulated by Festinger et al., to a broader focus on the generic processes of dissonance management in various religious and social groups.

In the classic study *When Prophecy Fails*, Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter offer us an account of one very small occult group, dubbed the Seekers, whose leader, Mrs. Marion Keech, predicted the destruction of much of the United States by a great flood.[1] Her loyal followers were to be rescued from this apocalypse by aliens aboard flying saucers who were communicating with her by telepathy. Several dates for the end were foretold by Mrs. Keech, but each passed uneventfully. Contrary to common sense, though, the group did not abandon its beliefs and disband even in the face of stark disconfirmation of these prophecies. Rather, a faithful core persisted and redoubled its efforts to convince others of the veracity of their ideas. From the study of this one group, Festinger and his colleagues developed the theory of cognitive dissonance: when people with strongly held beliefs are confronted by evidence clearly at odds with their beliefs, they will seek to resolve the discomfort caused by the discrepancy by convincing others to support their views rather than abandoning their commitments. They will

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seek some means of reestablishing cognitive consonance without sacrificing their religious convictions. With experimental confirmation, this theory has gone on to become a mainstay of social psychology, and in the sociology of religion there is something like an implicit consensus in support of this view as well. But does the record show that the response of the Seekers is consonant with that of other religious groups in the thrall of prophecy?

The thesis of *When Prophecy Fails* has not been examined as systematically as might be desired. Casting doubt on the methodology of the original study, several critics have argued that the findings are probably skewed by some "experimenter's effect." As Anthony van Fossen, Rodney Stark, and William Sims Bainbridge point out, it is difficult to put much faith in the evidence of Festinger et al. when so many of Mrs. Keech's small band of followers were actually social scientists engaged in covert participant observation.[2] Methodological concerns aside, however, the comparative study of the insights of Festinger et al. has proceeded, seizing opportunistically on those moments when scholars of religion have become aware of groups making religious prophecies about specific events. This has happened more often than might be imagined. I have found seventeen additional studies that examine at least twelve different religious groups (see Table 1), excluding studies of cargo cults in non-Western and preliterate societies.[3] It is not hard to think, moreover, of some other fairly conspicuous instances that could be investigated as well (e.g., the Church Universal and Triumphant).[4] The results of these studies are mixed, but on the whole the record shows that Festinger et al. were right to predict that many groups will survive the failure of prophecy. Why they survive is another matter. The reasons are much more complicated than *When Prophecy Fails* implies.

The entire literature on the failure of prophecy is vitiated by a certain ambiguity. For some scholars the issue at stake is quite specifically whether groups whose prophecies have failed try to convert others to their beliefs to resolve their dissonance. For others the focal point is more broadly how groups whose prophecies have failed simply survive by whatever means. These foci are related yet distinct. A review of the literature reveals a drift to the broader focus, one that I think is both understandable and appropriate. The broader focus calls attention to some of the other complex group dynamics that are equally responsible, in varying circumstances, for the persistence of faith in the face of apparent failure.

To date, the studies of groups who have made prophecies that failed have uncovered at least five different patterns of response:[5]

(a) some groups survive and begin to proselytize;[6]
(b) some groups survive and continue to proselytize;[7]
(c) some groups survive but their proselytizing declines;[8]
(d) some groups survive but they do not proselytize;[9]
(e) and some groups neither survive nor proselytize.[10]

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GROUP STUDIED:	STUDIED BY:	SURVIVAL OF FAILURE OF PROPHECY
Seekers	Festinger et al. (1956)	Yes, for a time
Church of the True Word	Hardyck and Braden (1962)	Yes, quite well
Ichigen no Miya	Takaaki (1979)	Yes, barely
Baha'is under the Provision of the Covenant	Balch et al. (1983) and Balch et al. (1997)	Yes, but with difficulties
Millerites	Melton (1985)	Yes, for a time
Universal Link	Melton (1985)	Yes, for a time
Jehovah's Witnesses	Zygmunt (1970) Wilson (1978) Singelenberg (1988)	Yes, quite well
Rouxists	van Fossen (1988)	Yes, quite well
Mission de l'Esprit Saint	Palmer and Finn (1992)	No
Institute of Applied Metaphysics	Palmer and Finn (1992)	Yes, quite well
Lubavitch Hasidim	Shaffir (1993, 1994, 1995) Dein (1997)	Yes, quite well
Unarians	Tumminia (1998)	Yes, fairly well
Chen Tao	Wright (1998)	Yes, but weakened

TABLE 1

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Logically a sixth category could be added: some groups begin to proselytize but do not survive. I can think of no case in the literature, however, that matches this possibility. Moreover, there is the ambiguity of cases like the Solar Temple and Heaven's Gate. They neither survived nor proselytized. But can we say that their prophecies failed?[11]

So what can we glean from the scholarly record so far? We can identify and document an array of adaptational strategies used by these groups in the face of the disconfirmation of their prophecies. We can also delineate a number of conditions that influence which strategies are used and what their effects might be. Some of these conditions are related to the social context of coping with a prophetic failure, while others refer to the larger doctrinal context of the prophecies. Some of these conditions can be derived directly from the observations made of specific groups, while others are still rather conjectural and have yet to be investigated properly. These developments are summarized in the next two sections of this paper (see Table 2). With these insights in

Adaptational Strategies	Influencing Conditions
(1) proselytization	(1) level of in-group social support
(2) rationalization -spiritualization -test of faith -human error -blaming others	(2) decisive leadership
(3) reaffirmation	(3) scope and sophistication of ideology
	(4) vagueness of the prophecy
	(5) presence of ritual framing
	(6) organizational factors

TABLE 2

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place, I will question whether the study of instances of prophetic failure has been skewed in objectionable ways by implicitly referring to the interpretive framework of cognitive dissonance, thereby implying marked deviance. In many instances prophetic failures may not be as unusual or disturbing as thought.[12] Thus the study of such failures might be situated better within an analysis of the ongoing management of dissonance within all religions.[13] In fact the most economical framework might be the analysis of the generic processes of dissonance management in social groups and institutions in general.[14]

THE ADAPTATIONAL STRATEGIES OF PROPHETIC MOVEMENTS

It is not my intention to provide a natural history of the social scientific study of the religious responses to prophetic disconfirmations. One can read the literature in chronological order to acquire such a perspective. The objective here is a distillation of the theoretical dividends paid by the diverse empirical studies undertaken so far. Zygmunt provided the last theoretical overview of the issue in 1972, and most of the best case studies have been written since.[15]

An examination of the literature soon reveals that proselytizing, whether newly begun or simply intensified, is only one of several possible adaptational strategies employed by religions coping with prophetic disconfirmation. As the itemization of response patterns provided above indicates, only a minority of groups studied (four of thirteen) sought to convert others to compensate for their disappointment. This was most clearly true of the UFO cult examined by Festinger et al., the Lubavitch Hasidim examined by Shaffir and by Dein, and, to a lesser extent, the Unarians examined by Tumminia, and the Millerites. In most cases this proselytizing was used in conjunction with other strategies. So, strictly speaking, the "law" of cognitive dissonance in the case of prophetic failures as formulated by Festinger et al. is incorrect, or, at any rate, it is framed too narrowly. In the literature at least two additional adaptational strategies—rationalization and reaffirmation—have been identified.

The rationalization of seeming failure is an adaptational strategy emphasized by Zygmunt in his early theoretical overview of this issue.[16] But, as J. Gordon Melton quite correctly comments, "the denial of failure is not just another option, but the common mode of adaptation of millennial groups following the failure of a prophecy."[17] The record of case studies examined here supports this contention. It is successful rationalization, and not proselytization, that is the most important factor

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contributing to the maintenance of beliefs and the survival of the group. Melton would agree with Bryan Wilson when he observes,

> For people whose lives have become dominated by one powerful expectation, and whose activities are dictated by what that belief requires, abandonment of faith because of disappointment about a date would usually be too traumatic an experience to contemplate. Reinterpretation is demanded.[18]

To some extent all of the groups that survived the disconfirmation of their prophecies did so because they were able to promptly provide their followers with a sufficiently plausible reinterpretation of events. But the leader of the one group that failed to survive altogether, the *Mission de l'Esprit Saint*,[19] and the leaders of groups that experienced dramatic declines in their fortunes (e.g., the *Ichigen no Miya* and the Baha'is Under the Provision of the Covenant, at least as first discussed by Balch et al.)[20] also provided rationalizations. In these cases, however, the leaders were too late in crafting their rationalizations, and they were inadequately communicated to the membership.

More specifically, as several of the authors suggest in various ways, we can distinguish between at least four kinds of rationalization: spiritualization, a test of faith, human error, and blaming others. Some of the groups studied favored one of these modes of rationalization over the other, but they usually appear in various combinations.

Melton clarifies what he has in mind in proposing the useful term "spiritualization" as follows:

> The prophesied event is reinterpreted in such a way that what was supposed to have been a visible, verifiable occurrence is seen to have been in reality an invisible, spiritual occurrence. The event occurred as predicted, only on a spiritual level.[21]

Probably the best known case of spiritualization in the contemporary Western world is the Jehovah's Witnesses' claim that the foundation for the millennium of peace was laid, spiritually, in 1914 when the Witnesses experienced an early and dramatic failure of prophecy. Zygmunt discusses this and other instances of spiritualization with regard to the Jehovah's Witnesses, and so does Wilson.[22] Melton provides another example from England with a small group called the Universal Link, while Balch et al. and Tumminia describe, respectively, the Baha'i and the Unarian use of this strategy.[23] Shaffir and Dein demonstrate how rapidly the Lubavitch Hasidim reverted to such a mode of rationalization with the death of their living messiah, the Rebbe.[24] Of course, in each of these instances the exact form of the rationalization invoked varies.

Consider, for example, the following passage from Shaffir's excellent description of the Lubavitch reaction:

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One of the Rebbe's secretaries urged the members of the movement to remember that the Rebbe's presence must continue to dominate every aspect of life (thus reiterating the Rebbe's own recommendation when his predecessor had died). . . :

> The Alter Rebbe [the first Lubavitcher Rebbe] in Tanya [the first Lubavitcher Rebbe's work outlining the philosophy of Habad] . . . quotes the Zohar, "A Tzaddik [an inspired leader] who departs from this world is present in all the worlds more than he was during his lifetime." And the Alter Rebbe explains that the Zohar also means to say that the Tzaddik is present in this physical world more than during his life on this world. He also tells us that after the departure of the Neshomo [the soul] from this world, the Neshomo of the Tzaddik generates more strength and more Koach (power) to his devoted disciples.[25]

In speaking to the Lubavitch, Shaffir was advised that miraculous things had occurred since the Rebbe's death and that these happenings were attributable to his spiritual intervention on their behalf.

In the case of the Institute for Applied Metaphysics, a New Age group, Palmer and Finn report the curious finding that several hundred followers of Winnifred Barton, scattered in three widely separated parts of Canada, more or less spontaneously transformed a prediction of the end of the world "as we know it" (at 6:00 P.M. on 13 June 1975) into a subtle shift in consciousness. In the words of one of Palmer and Finn's informants,

> At ten o'clock suddenly Win arrives. She just came in and went to the front and started meditating. There was music playing and we all meditated. An hour passed, then suddenly, it was twelve o'clock. We were still here. What had happened? Then I heard people around me saying, "Wow! Did you feel that?" A lot of people definitely felt something, that something spiritual had happened. Certainly, nothing physical had. It's lucky that Win always tacked on that phrase, "as we know it."[26]

Not all the followers agreed. But enough did to transform the group from what was essentially a client cult into a full cult movement that chose to live communally for the first time.

Perhaps the single most interesting illustration of an attempt to spiritualize a seeming prophetic failure is provided by Takaaki's description of the actions of the leader of the *Ichigen no Miya*, Motoki Isamu. On the day when the apocalypse failed to arrive as predicted, Isamu attempted a ritualistic suicide. This seeming admission of defeat was later reinterpreted and transformed into a sign of triumph. Having cut open his abdomen, Isamu had a vision of his body as the islands of Japan in flames, causing him to realize that "god had transferred the cataclysm to my own body."[27] In Christ-like manner, he eventually

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announced that he had taken on the pain of humanity, spiritually staving off the anticipated earthquake.[28]

There can be several variants of the second rationalization, the test of faith, as well. Much depends on the beliefs in question, the specific history and circumstances of the group, the resourcefulness of its leadership, and its cultural heritage and context. The Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of the True Word, the Lubavitch, and the Baha'is Under the Provisions of the Covenant all relied significantly on this approach. But there are elements of it in most of the thirteen groups analyzed. After forty-two days in the bomb shelters waiting for the apocalypse that never came, the hundred and three faithful of the Church of the True Word emerged to celebrate in unison the victory that their leader assured them they had achieved. They had proven their faith to the Lord and set an example for the world by preparing for the true destruction that they knew was still imminent.[29] In most of the other cases the role played by this rationalization is more implicit. It is more or less a constituent part of the decision of these groups to persevere in the face of adversity.

The third rationalization, attributing the failure of prophecy to human error (usually referring to the misunderstanding, miscalculation, or moral inadequacy of followers) is very common, especially in groups stemming from more traditional religious backgrounds. In the case of the Lubavitch, many members told Shaffir quite straightforwardly that the messiah "would have come, but we didn't merit it . . . if we merited it, things would have worked out differently."[30] In the eyes of many of the faithful the error was theirs in even thinking that they could discern the mysterious ways of God. Soon new interpretations of past events and the words of the Rebbe were circulating widely in the movement, all showing how the followers had failed to read the signs correctly.

The response of the leadership of the Jehovah's Witnesses to the failure of their 1975 prophecy as well as the response of the leader of the *Ichigen no Miya* was similar, though more harsh in nature. By a rather bizarre turn of logic, the leaders in each of these cases chose to place their followers in a kind of catch-22 by blaming them, after the fact, for having brought on the failure of prophecy by having believed in the prophecy too literally in the first place. In a speech to his followers, Motoki Isamu, the founder of the *Ichigen no Miya*, said,

> On 18 June at 8:30 A.M. God accepted the founder's life. Some people would speak of him as a living corpse, but God will make use of his spirit for ever . . . All of you are failures. Why? You thought that if God's prophecy did not materialize, you would be so scorned and slandered by people that you would fall into total ruin. So you looked with eagerness for a disaster to occur. That was your wish, but it was not the will of God. If you had the magnanimity to desire that everybody be saved, you could be content with slander or any

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treatment you received. Above all else you should have prayed to God that everybody be saved without adversity . . . .[31]

In like manner, Singelenberg reports, the leadership of the Jehovah's Witnesses responded as follows:

"'Do you know why nothing happened in 1975?' Then, pointing at his audience, he shouted: 'It was because YOU expected something to happen.'" Thus said the Watchtower Society's president to Canadian Witnesses during a speech held in 1976. This attitude of non-responsibility of the leading members towards the Witnesses' frustrations caused by the prophecy failure was also exhibited in the Society's initial publications. As distinct from the probability of a coalescence of the first 6,000 years' termination of man's history with the beginning of the millennium, this expectation was now flatly denied. Doctrinal changes were called for. It turned out that Eve's creation was the weak link in the prophecy's starting-point: the 6,000 years should have been counted from that date on. The scriptures, however, were not decisive when that event took place, as opposed to the 1966 results of the Society's exegetic research. So it was impossible to construct a specific apocalyptic calendar. Failure had been expounded.[32]

Here, of course, we see the limitations of any typological approach, for the leadership of the Witnesses are blending two of the rationalizations I have distinguished to defend themselves against criticism. They are pointing to the role of human error, my third type of rationalization, as well as directing the blame at others, my fourth type of rationalization.

In the case of the Unarians, as studied by Tumminia, a similar blend of rationalizations is encountered. The UFOs could not or would not land as expected, we are told, because "our collective 'frequency vibration' is exceedingly low. Moreover, at [our] present level of consciousness, human beings 'put out' many negative emotions that create a bad climate for the reception of the Space Brothers."[33] More specifically, the Unarians were at pains to explain to Tumminia that the seeming failure of prophecy was the product of the erroneous reasoning of others, not themselves. Tumminia summarizes the situation as follows:

According to Unarius, errors in an outsider's understanding stem from their lack of competence in Unarian Science. Competent Unarians see no trouble with this puzzle of prophecy, while incompetent questioners, such as myself, flounder in interpretive errors. By identifying the sources of interpretive errors with logical incompetence, they explained away the charges of false prophecy. First of all, it was explained to me that there was no prophecy. The media called the event prophecy, not Unarius. Prophecy implies a prediction that could fail, and that is not what transpired, say Unarians. Uriel had a "reliving," not a prophecy. She relived the time when she was Isis. Furthermore, it was pointed out to me that Unarians do not say "prophecy" if they can help it; they

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say "future viewing" or "seeing the future." Anyone using the term "prophecy" was suspect as lacking the capacity for logical discourse.[34]

Judging by the thirteen groups considered in the literature, directly blaming others (whether natural or supernatural beings or impersonal forces) for the obstruction of a prophecy is relatively rare. The only other similar instance I can think of is reported by Balch et al. when they note that one of the many subtle rationalizations used by the Baha'is Under the Provisions of the Covenant was to blame outsiders for misrepresenting their qualified and humanly fallible "predictions," based on Biblical interpretation, for absolute "prophecies" given by God.[35]

Such is not the case, however, with the third and final adaptational strategy, reaffirmation. Almost all of the groups employed this defense against dissonance, though some researchers seem to be attuned more to this fact than others.[36] In the face of the obvious social disruption attendant on prophetic failure, Melton suggests that many movements turn inward and "engage in processes of group building."[37] To illustrate his point he cites the case of the Millerites as they consolidated into the Adventist movement and the Church of the True Word as described by Hardyck and Braden. The leadership of the latter group never missed a beat. On the morning the group emerged from the bomb shelters a rousing collective service was held in which the seeming failure of prophecy was immediately cast in a new light as the followers were praised heartily for keeping the faith and admonished to keep preparing for the real apocalypse to come. Likewise, from the accounts of Shaffir and Dein, it is clear that the Lubavitch somewhat surprisingly took the physical death of their Rebbe as a challenge to proceed all the more zealously with their program of spiritual renewal and proselytization.[38] A week after his death, for example, a day-long public "teach-in" was held at their headquarters in Brooklyn, New York. On this and other occasions, Shaffir notes, speaker after speaker drove home the same message: despite the overwhelming grief felt by all, immediate action must be taken to obey the Rebbe's directives. His emissaries must turn their attention back to the most avid service of the salvific mission the Rebbe had so promisingly begun.[39] Similar patterns can be traced for the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unarians. But the fullest appreciation of the possible significance of these acts of reaffirmation is found in van Fossen's study of Rouxism[40] and in Palmer and Finn's discussion of the Institute for Applied Metaphysics (IAM). In the conclusion to their paper, Palmer and Finn make some welcome and insightful suggestions:

> When contemporary spiritual groups unexpectedly embark on the millenarian adventure, the leader appears to be responding to conflicts or "growing pains" within her or his community that require a radical reorganization—or a rebirth.

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In such cases, the rite of apocalypse, ostensibly aimed at destroying the old order of the planet Earth, actually functions to bring about a new order within the cult or sect. When examined within the framework of the charismatic career of the leader-founder, or the group's changing relationship with its host society, the "acting out" of Endtime often appears to function as a collective rite of passage into a new group identity. When a loosely-knit group begins to band together in a commune, the apocalyptic ritual may be compared to Kanter's (1968) six commitment mechanisms operating simultaneously in full force.[41]

These observations help to explain the survival and transformation of the IAM in particular, and they are indicative of how I would like to see the analysis of the failure of prophecy recast in a broader framework of organizational processes as well (see below). I am less sanguine than Palmer and Finn, however, about the value of using this specific explanatory framework for most cases of prophetic failure. The same reservation applies to van Fossen's even more specific suggestion that religious groups must expand their organizational structure, become more hierarchical, and enlarge the cosmological identity of the group's leadership and its mission if it is to survive the failure of prophecy.[42] There are hints of a similar though more limited transformation occurring in the Japanese group studied by Takaaki.[43] In lieu, however, of additional studies that take this possible mode of adaptation into specific consideration, at this point it seems wiser to see this kind of transformative process as a particularly striking instance of the larger category of adaptations classified as reaffirmations. Some of what van Fossen says about the fate of Rouxism and Palmer and Finn's analysis of IAM are most helpful, though, in delineating the conditions influencing the nature and relative success of attempts to cope with the failure of prophecy.

CONDITIONS INFLUENCING ADAPTATIONAL STRATEGIES AND THEIR SUCCESS

Moving roughly from the most empirically substantiated to more speculative conditions, the current literature on prophetic failures suggests there are at least six conditions researchers should keep in mind when considering the effectiveness of adaptational strategies. These conditions are interrelated and overlap to some extent.

The first and most commonly addressed condition, from the classic study of Festinger et al. on, is the level of in-group social support present in the situation of prophetic failure. The push to proselytize, to rationalize, or to reaffirm will, more often than not, take the sting out a failure of prophecy if the need for and commitment to these strategies is shared by others. This condition figures prominently in the findings

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of Festinger et al. for the Seekers, Hardyck and Braden for the Church of the True Word, Zygmunt and Singelenberg for the Jehovah's Witnesses, Takaaki for the *Ichigen no Miya*, van Fossen for the Rouxists, Palmer and Finn for the Institute of Applied Metaphysics, Shaffir and Dein for the Lubavitch, and Tumminia for the Unarians. To some extent, the larger the group in question, the better. The loss of some members and the continued dissent of others can be borne more effectively by a larger group. But in the end it does not seem to be so much the size as the solidarity or cohesiveness of the group that really matters. To some extent it is the sheer amount of intra-group social interaction that makes the difference. As indicated above, for example, the small gatherings of people awaiting the fulfillment of Winnifred Barton's prophecy were willing to act with little prompting on the cue provided, more or less spontaneously, by a few members to effect the complete spiritualization of her failed prediction.

A sub-aspect of this condition that several researchers have called some attention to is the need for clear lines of communication when the members of a group are geographically scattered.[44] Ideally, to survive the failure of prophecy a group should be united in one location, as with the Church of the True Word. Or, as in the case of the Lubavitch, they should be so intimately connected by whatever means possible to the hub of activity around the leader that the alienating effects of distance are mitigated. In the last years of the Rebbe, a great many Lubavitch lived with pagers to be ready at a moment's notice to receive the latest news of the messiah, or as happened, to fly to New York to participate in the Rebbe's funeral and the dawning of a new era. With some tenacity, the Lubavitch have sought to take advantage of all that technology can offer (e.g., the Internet[45]) to spread the word and to keep in close contact with their religious comrades worldwide. The three groups that suffered the most serious setbacks from the failure of their prophecies—the *Ichigen no Miya*, the Baha'is Under the Provision of the Covenant, and the Catholic extremists of the *Mission de l'Esprit Saint*—all failed to establish effective lines of communication amongst their often dispersed members, and this significantly undermined the solidarity of their groups at the moment of crisis.

This state of affairs best illustrates the second most obvious condition affecting the way a group will respond to the failure of prophecy as well: the role of leadership. Looking at the obverse situation, the three groups most successful in surviving the disconfirmation of their prophecies—that is, the Church of the True Word, Institute of Applied Metaphysics, and the Lubavitch—it is clear that the quick, confident, coordinated, and resourceful reaction of the leadership was crucial. Perhaps this should come as no surprise, for as Zygmunt observes astutely, "the processes involved in meeting prophetic failure and in sustaining millenarian dreams do not seem to be altogether different

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from the processes mediating the generation and diffusion of prophecies in the first place."[46] Most particularly, it is the exceptional charisma of specific leaders that is instrumental to the birth of prophetic movements, and it is the abdication of that charisma that is fatal to these movements. If the leader appears to pause in confusion in the face of failure, as happened with Motoki Isamu of the *Ichigen no Miya*, Leland Jensen of the Baha'is Under the Provision of the Covenant, and Emmanuel Robitaille of the *Mission de l'Esprit Saint*, all may be lost. What is more, as Palmer and Finn suggest, the ability of a group to weather the storm of failure may be related to specific features of the charismatic authority in question. Barton, the leader of IAM, was the founder of a growing new movement and her charisma was on the rise, while Robitaille led an established group founded by his father. The charisma he exercised was derivative. It was the charisma of office and was associated with his priestly function. His apocalyptic vision was in some respects derivative as well. The prophecy was received from his father in a dream, and there is some reason to believe that his own authority within the group was waning at the time of this prophecy.[47]

Singelenberg's detailed analysis of the nature and consequences of the 1975 prophetic disconfirmation of the Jehovah's Witnesses presents an interesting test case of the role of leadership, one that falls between the extremes examined so far. The leaders of the church responded quite strongly, though not too quickly, to the failure of 1975. They chose, however, more or less to repudiate the prophecy, even though they had promoted it. They hid behind the vagueness of the prophecy's terms of reference, terms that may well have been kept vague as a safeguard against the possibility of failure. This definite yet compromised response prevented a full scale disaster, but it cost the church many members in the short run.[48]

The third most significant condition affecting the response to prophetic failure is the scope and sophistication of a group's ideological system.[49] If specific prophecies are anchored in a broader and more complex set of beliefs that frame a fairly comprehensive worldview, sense of mission, and collective identity, it is unlikely that specific disconfirmations will have a serious impact on the integrity of a group. In part this is simply because the movement will have the ideological resources at hand readily to formulate plausible rationalizations. The immediate failure can always be subsumed within a larger and more ingrained repertoire of millennial hopes and fears.[50] In analyzing specific cases, several researchers discuss how followers could persist in their faith if their beliefs were elaborate enough. Speaking of the Baha'is Under the Provision of the Covenant, Balch et al. say,

> . . . most believers had strong identities as BUPC that transcended their commitment to Doc's prediction. For them the faith offered both an all-

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embracing theodicy and an eminently desirable plan for living. While most had been attracted to the faith by its apocalyptic orientation, they subsequently acquired a firm grounding in a coherent body of Baha'i teachings dating back over 100 years. As a result, Doc's followers were able to cope with disconfirmation by shifting the focus of their lives away from Doc and placing greater emphasis on the fundamentals of the BUPC faith.[51]

Singelenberg suggests that most of the losses experienced by the Dutch Jehovah's Witnesses he studied after the 1975 failure reflected the departure of people who had been attracted only recently to the faith by the prediction. Such people had yet to be properly socialized into the larger worldview and lifestyle of the Witnesses.[52]

In some ways this insight plays upon the obvious. But as Melton stressed more than a decade ago, it bears repeating, especially in the shadow of the third millennium,

> The belief that prophecy is the organizing or determining principle for millennial groups is common among media representatives, nonmillennial religious rivals, and scholars. In their eagerness to isolate what they see as a decisive or interesting fact, they ignore or pay only passing attention to the larger belief structure of the group and the role that structure plays in the life of believers. Unfulfilled millennial expectations failed to invalidate Apostolic Christianity, which gradually reinterpreted the apocalyptic elements of its emerging theology; similarly, unrealized expectations failed to invalidate the faith of other groups.[53]

As Melton and van Fossen stress, millennial groups are not really "organized around the prediction of some future events."[54] Festinger et al. were misguided in seeing prophecies in simply true or false terms. Prophecy in these groups is part of a denser continuum of cosmologically significant beliefs and activities that can embrace and contain contradictions.[55]

The fourth condition is the very nature of the prophecies made and the kinds of actions the prophecies inspire. Festinger et al. stipulate five conditions under which their theory of cognitive dissonance holds.[56] The third condition is that the prophecy in question must be sufficiently specific and focused on the real world to allow for its unequivocal refutation by events. Many of the later studies, however, voice the suspicion that groups have a better chance of surviving the failure of prophecy if the predictions in question are vaguely formulated.[57] Clearly vague prophecies are more readily rationalized, as exemplified by the spiritualization of Winnifred Barton's prophecy, with its convenient escape clause about changing the world "as we know it." Balch et al. point out that the leaders of the Baha'is Under the Provision of the Covenant began eventually to purposefully incorporate "disclaimers" about the reliability of their predictions into their prophecies.[58]

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Singelenberg takes special note of the incongruity of the vague 1975 Witness prophecy in a group known for its inflexible and legalistic approach to doctrine. In line with James Beckford and James Penton, he speculates "that the '1975' prophecy [may have] been consciously formulated rather ambiguously in order to prevent massive falling away in case of disconfirmations."[59]

Similarly, it seems likely that the impact of a prophetic failure will be shaped by the kind of actions undertaken in service of that prophecy. Zygmunt, for example, suggests that different prophecies might be associated with different patterns of action, or combinations of actions. He identifies four possibilities: expressive, agitational, preparatory, and interventional actions.[60] Without delving into the details here, it is apparent that disappointment is likely to be greater in cases where more extreme actions have been elicited from followers. When bridges have been burned, through, for example, the sale of worldly belongings or withdrawal from society, the significance of the specific prophetic moment is heightened. Disconfirmation may then have a shattering effect on the individual. With appropriate social support and a resourceful leader, however, the heavy investment of followers in a movement may actually assure the successful navigation of disconfirmation. Likewise, elaborate preparatory actions may either exhaust the capacity of individuals and groups to persevere, or at least lead them to fail to act on future prophecies. The former seems to have been the case, in part, with the *Mission de l'Esprit Saint*, and the latter certainly was the case with the Baha'is Under the Provision of the Covenant.[61] The strain of engaging in agitation or interventions in the world also may lead to burn-out. These actions may galvanize the hostility of outsiders toward the group, leading to the ridicule of its beliefs and preparations. Intense ridicule may demoralize the group and hasten its disintegration. Contrarily, though, as Hardyck and Braden argue, groups faced with such ridicule may work all the harder to proselytize or simply to maintain solidarity to escape cognitive dissonance.[62] The bottom line is that we lack enough empirical case studies of appropriate specificity to make sound generalizations at this point. We can only stipulate the different possibilities that are all contingent on circumstances.

The fifth condition determining whether a group will outlive a prophetic failure is the role of ritual in framing the experience of prophecy and its failure. Palmer and Finn most intriguingly call attention to the fact that "waiting for the world's end is a symbolic act—'stylized,' 'intrinsically valued,' and 'authoritatively designated' like other rituals—and requires the presence of ritual actors and the organization of sacred space and time."[63] Like many other rituals, both the process of preparing for the apocalypse and the process of successfully rationalizing a prophetic failure can be used to purge old sins and purify believers, to

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initiate them into a new identity and relationships, to induce a greatly heightened sense of excitement and purpose, or to create altered states of consciousness and ecstasy. Palmer and Finn postulate that the successful ritualization of "Endtime events" is essential to the survival of groups, pointing to the experience of the Institute of Applied Metaphysics.[64] A similar reading could be applied to the experience of the Church of the True Word, the Rouxists, and the Unarians. In fact the Unarians explicitly transformed a specific prediction of UFO landings into a repeatable "reliving" or "facing of the past" involving the creation and recurrent re-enactment or witnessing of a psychodrama about the "Isis-Osiris Cycle." Participation in this psychodrama, even merely as an informed spectator, is said to have a "healing" effect that confirms the "truth" of the prophecy. The spiritualization effected by the Unarians, that is, is enacted and embodied through ritual activities.[65]

Sixth and lastly, various organizational factors undoubtedly condition the adaptive strategies adopted by groups and their ability to cope with prophetic disconfirmation. Surprisingly, however, these factors have not been examined systematically. As Melton pointed out some time ago, "millennial groups vary widely in their thought worlds and lifestyles. Some are tightly structured, communally organized, and separatist; others are the opposite. Some are small, informal, and intimate while others are relatively large, well organized, and composed of members unacquainted with each other."[66] Are these differences significant factors? At this juncture, for lack of reliable evidence, we cannot say.[67]

Clearly more case studies are needed, and with the dawning of the third millennium sociologists may be provided with the opportunity to enrich the literature.[68] It is time, however, for these studies to proceed in a more focused and cumulative manner. Hopefully, this analytic ordering of the findings so far will facilitate the development of even more precise and systematically comparable insights into what happens when prophecy fails. To that end, however, my reading of the literature suggests that a broader theoretical reorientation is required.

FROM CRISES OF DISSONANCE TO DISSONANCE MANAGEMENT

As Zygmunt adeptly explains, the disconfirmation of a specific prophecy may threaten the success of a religious movement on a number of fronts:

> It may invalidate the charismatic status of the movement's leadership and thus contribute to group discoordination and the attrition of membership support. It may foster the rise of new leaders, whose competition with each other and

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with existing leaders contributes to organizational fragmentation in the form of factionalism or schism. Insofar as the prophecies in question were derived from, or were linked to, a broader body of doctrine, their disconfirmation may undermine faith in the latter, thus precipitating more comprehensive ideological crises. Preparatory actions taken in anticipation of prophetic fulfillment may have depleted the resources of individual members and of the movement, leaving them in a stringent predicament. Agitational, preparatory, or interventional actions previously undertaken may have alienated other groups, who heap abuse and ridicule upon the movement for its delusions and rash behaviors. Discreditation of the movement in the eyes of marginal or potential supporters may seriously reduce the movement's recruiting ground and the effectiveness of its proselytization.[69]

As indicated, all of these things are possible. They may even seem likely. Yet the record of empirical investigations so far suggests that they rarely happen. Only one of the thirteen groups examined actually collapsed after the failure of a prophecy. In this case, as explained, it was the singular ineptness of the leadership that played the decisive role in the dissolution of the group. Several other groups did experience serious reversals in their fortunes after a prophetic failure. But in the first flush of disconfirmation neither the authority of the leaders, charismatic or otherwise, nor the ideology of the groups was challenged by the membership, even though their individual and collective resources had been depleted. When the leaders of these groups stumbled, however, and failed to provide rationalizations for the disconfirmations sufficiently soon after the experience of disillusionment, a true crisis was precipitated. In every other case, it could be said that the groups in question took the failure of prophecy more or less in stride. This suggests, as intimated by Zygmunt, van Fossen, and Palmer and Finn, that prophecies and their failures should be placed in the larger analytical context of the transformation and institutionalization of religious organizations.[70] More specifically, following the suggestion of Robert Prus, I think prophetic failures might best be seen as one dramatic instance of a more pervasive aspect of all religious life, if not life in all groups and organizations: the interactive and collective management of dissonance.[71]

Balch et al. describe how the Baha'is Under the Provision of the Covenant developed a "culture of dissonance-reduction" in the face of the repeated failure of their leaders' prophecies.[72] As Prus points out, religious believers, especially in the modern world, are apt to encounter a great deal of information that is inconsistent with their religious convictions. These people and their religious leaders must cope with this dissonance on a daily basis.[73] Studies by Mauss and Petersen, Dunford and Kunz, and Prus begin to demonstrate the myriad ways in which most religious groups and individuals can neutralize the dissonance pressing upon them.[74] Prus describes some of the ways in

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which dissonance is managed in many regular and important aspects of religious life. Religious organizations learn how to cope with or defuse dissonance with regard to recruiting people, while individuals learn how to deal with dissonance in contemplating whether to join religious groups. Groups and individuals develop procedures for keeping and strengthening the faith of existing members through the neutralization of dissonance. Likewise they learn how to manage dissonance with regard to such things as choosing between and coordinating the diverse demands of a religious commitment. As with joining, individuals also call upon various dissonance management techniques in contemplating why and how they might leave a religion, while groups develop specific means of managing dissonance to help dissuade people from leaving. In each case, Prus argues, we will learn to appreciate just how pervasive these processes are in religious life if we heed a more fundamental insight too often neglected in the discussions of such seemingly dramatic events as prophetic failures:

> While the degree of importance attributed to a discrepancy is critical vis-à-vis dissonance-reduction motivation, the intensity of any dissonance is not an intrinsic quality of the discrepancy in question, but is a problematic and negotiable subjective assessment, reflecting one's cultural experiences, specific referent and contact [with] others, and immediate/anticipated interests. While dissonance provides a motivational impetus, persons may learn to tolerate or to accentuate it, with others influencing the extent to which dissonance is recognized and experienced, as well as the manner in which it is handled.[75]

The resilience displayed by religious groups in the face of prophetic failures suggests, as several commentators have argued, that the level of dissonance experienced by insiders is less than that imagined by outsiders, particularly social scientific researchers with their greater personal and professional commitment to logical consistency.[76] In the simple and poignant words of Snow and Machalek, "Unlike belief in science, many belief systems do not require consistent and frequent confirmatory evidence. Beliefs may withstand the pressure of disconfirming events not because of the effectiveness of dissonance-reducing strategies, but because disconfirming evidence may simply go unacknowledged."[77] In *When Prophecy Fails*, however, Festinger et al. stipulated, as a condition of the theory of cognitive dissonance, that the disconfirmation of a prophecy must be recognized forthrightly by believers. But how can we ever gauge if this kind of recognition really has happened? This is more than just another version of the metatheoretical problem of "other minds." It is not simply that we can never know fully the thoughts of others. Rather, we are returned to the basic question undergirding the debate about the failure of prophecy. In principle, if a group did fully recognize the failure of its prophecy, then why would the group persist in its beliefs? As in most cases, we

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now know they do—whether they engage in more proselytizing or not. The very continuation of these groups, which in a sense provided the *raison d'être* for the formulation of the theory of cognitive dissonance, also implies the reverse state of affairs: real recognition has not occurred, and that is why the groups continue. As this analysis of the full range of case studies reveals, it does in fact seem that in these groups we are dealing with a significantly different standard of evidence than that applied by researchers. From their perspective there is ample "evidence" of impending doom in the abundant imperfections of this world, and every reason to keep seeking dramatic release from these imperfections in the ever receding yet open-ended promise of the future. In the face of this perplexing proclivity, we need more and more nuanced ethnographic accounts of the words, deeds, thoughts, and feelings of the men and women awaiting the end. Once again, more stories must be told, and with greater theoretical and empirical care, if we are to gain an adequate understanding of how and why faith does persist in the face of the repeated failure of prophecy.[78]

ENDNOTES

[1] Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956).

[2] Anthony B. van Fossen, "How Do Movements Survive Failures of Prophecy?" in *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, eds. L. Kreisberg, B. Misztal, and J. Mucha (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1988), 194-96; Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 220; William Sims Bainbridge, *The Sociology of Religious Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 136-38.

[3] There are of course other discussions of this topic, but either they are not case studies of the failure of prophecy in specific groups or they are passing discussions of this issue in the context of larger studies of specific groups or other topics. For example, Roy Wallis has published a brief essay with the rather misleading title "Reflections on *When Prophecy Fails*" in his book *Salvation and Protest: Studies in Social and Religious Movements* (London: Frances Pinter, 1979), 44-50. This essay describes the group led by Mrs. Keech, contrasting its features with those of another UFO cult, the Aetherius Society. This is done, however, to highlight some points Wallis has made about the traits of cults. The issue of surviving the failure of prophecy plays no significant role in his reflections. All the same, through ignorance or oversight I may have failed to discuss some relevant and significant studies. Suggestions from readers of this article about such additional sources are welcome.

[4] J. Gordon Melton presented a paper on prophecies in the Church Universal and Triumphant at the 1998 meetings of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, November 6-8, Montreal, Canada, entitled "Preparing for the Endtime: The Case of the Church Universal and Triumphant," but I have been unable to secure a copy.

[5] I am extending an approach first taken in Susan J. Palmer and Natalie Finn, "Coping with Apocalypse in Canada: Experiences of Endtime in *La Mission de l'Esprit Saint* and

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the Institute of Applied Metaphysics," *Sociological Analysis* 53 (1992): 397-415. They specify three response patterns.

[6] See Festinger et al., *When Prophecy Fails*. The Seekers studied by Festinger et al. survived for some time. But, as Robert Balch has told me, Mrs. Keech (whose real name was Dorothy Martin) eventually moved to Sedona, Arizona, where she started another group under the name Sister Thedra.

[7] See, for example, Joseph F. Zygmunt, "Prophetic Failure and Chiliastic Identity: The Case of Jehovah's Witnesses," *American Journal of Sociology* 75 (1970): 926-48; J. Gordon Melton, "Spiritualization and Reaffirmation: What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails," *American Studies* 26 (1985): 17-29; William Shaffir, "Jewish Messianism Lubavitch-Style: An Interim Report," *The Jewish Journal of Sociology* 35 (1993): 115-28, "Interpreting Adversity: Dynamics of Commitment in a Messianic Redemption Campaign," *The Jewish Journal of Sociology* 36 (1994): 43-53, and "When Prophecy is Not Validated: Explaining the Unexpected in a Messianic Campaign," *The Jewish Journal of Sociology* 37 (1995): 119-136; Simon Dein, "Lubavitch: A Contemporary Messianic Movement," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 12 (1997): 191-204, and "When Prophecy Fails: Messianism Amongst the Lubavitch Hasids," in *The Coming Deliverer: Millennial Themes in World Religions*, eds. Fiona Bowie and Christopher Deacy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 238-60; Diana Tumminia, "How Prophecy Never Fails: Interpretive Reason in a Flying-Saucer Group," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 59 (1998): 157-70.

[8] See, for example, Bryan Wilson, "When Prophecy Failed," *New Society* 26 (1978): 183-84; Richard Singelenberg, "'It Separated the Wheat from the Chaff': The '1975' Prophecy and Its Impact among Dutch Jehovah's Witnesses," *Sociological Analysis* 50 (1988): 23-40; Rodney Stark and Laurence Iannaccone, "Why the Jehovah's Witnesses Grow So Rapidly: A Theoretical Application," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 12 (1997): 133-57; Robert W. Balch, John Domitrovich, Barbara Lynn Maknke, and Vanessa Morrison, "Fifteen Years of Failed Prophecy: Coping with Cognitive Dissonance in a Baha'i Sect," in *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem*, eds. Thomas Robbins and Susan Palmer (New York: Routledge, 1997), 73-90.

[9] See, for example, Jane Allyn Hardyck and Marcia Braden, "Prophecy Fails Again: A Report of a Failure to Replicate," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 65 (1962): 136-41; Sanada Takaaki, "After Prophecy Fails: A Reappraisal of a Japanese Case," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6 (1979): 217-37; Palmer and Finn, "Coping with Apocalypse in Canada"; and Stuart A. Wright, "Chen Tao: A Case Study in the Failure of Prophecy," a paper presented to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, November 6-8, 1998, in Montreal, Canada.

[10] See, for example, Robert W. Balch, Gwen Farnsworth, and Sue Wilkins, "When the Bombs Drop: Reactions to Disconfirmed Prophecy in a Millennial Sect," *Sociological Perspectives* 26 (1983): 137-58; Palmer and Finn, "Coping with Apocalypse in Canada."

[11] Many past attempts to test the conclusions of Festinger et al. have framed matters too simply by not adequately taking into consideration a diachronic view. Some groups, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, can be said to both confirm and disconfirm the theory of cognitive dissonance. It depends on when in the history of the group the question is asked. Joseph Zygmunt (1970) is impressed by the resilience of the Jehovah's Witnesses—their capacity to survive the repeated failure of prophecies and to continue proselytizing. Bryan Wilson (1978) expresses similar views. But Zygmunt expressed his views before the most recent failure of Jehovah's Witness prophecy in 1975. Moreover, like Wilson, who is writing in response to the 1975 disconfirmation, he lacks the best data with which to accurately assess the impact of this and previous prophetic failures on the movement. Writing with better information, Singelenberg (1988) is able to argue that proselytizing efforts underwent a marked and sustained decline following the 1975 disconfirmation despite the group's ability eventually to replace the members who left shortly after this fiasco. In other words, in the long run it would seem that the Jehovah's Witnesses might best be identified with the second response pattern noted above. They have outlived several prophetic failures and continued to grow. In the short run, however, there is

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reason to favor the third pattern. They survived the failure of the 1975 prophecy, but their proselytizing declined sharply. Similar diachronic variations may affect the assessment of other groups, like, for example, the Baha'is Under the Provision of the Covenant as studied by Balch et al. in the early 1980s and then again in the late 1990s.

[12] See, for example, David Snow and Richard Machalek, "On the Presumed Fragility of Unconventional Beliefs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21 (1982): 15-26; Colin Campbell and Shirley McIver, "Cultural Supports for Contemporary Occultism," *Social Compass* 34 (1987): 41-60.

[13] See, for example, Franklyn W. Dunford and Phillip R. Kunz, "The Neutralization of Religious Dissonance," *Review of Religious Research* 15 (1973): 2-9; Robert C. Prus, "Religious Recruitment and the Management of Dissonance: A Sociological Perspective," *Sociological Inquiry* 46 (1976): 127-34.

[14] See, for example, Robert C. Prus, "Generic Social Processes: Maximizing Conceptual Development in Ethnographic Research," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 16 (1987): 250-93 and Robert C. Prus, *Symbolic Interaction and Ethnographic Research* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 141-72.

[15] Joseph F. Zygmunt, "When Prophecies Fail: A Theoretical Perspective on the Comparative Evidence," *American Behavioral Scientist* 16 (1972): 245-67.

[16] Zygmunt, "When Prophecies Fail."

[17] Melton, "Spiritualization and Reaffirmation," 21.

[18] Wilson, "When Prophecy Failed," 184.

[19] See Palmer and Finn, "Coping with Apocalypse in Canada."

[20] Balch et al., "When the Bombs Drop."

[21] Melton, "Spiritualization and Reaffirmation," 21.

[22] Zygmunt, "Prophetic Failure and Chiliastic Identity"; Wilson, "When Prophecy Failed."

[23] Melton, "Spiritualization and Reaffirmation"; Balch et al., "Fifteen Years of Failed Prophecy"; Tumminia, "How Prophecy Never Fails."

[24] Shaffir, "When Prophecy is Not Validated"; Dein, "Lubavitch."

[25] Shaffir, "When Prophecy is Not Validated," 129; see Dein, "Lubavitch," 203 as well.

[26] Palmer and Finn, "Coping with Apocalypse in Canada," 406.

[27] Takaaki, "After Prophecy Fails," 227.

[28] See Wright, "Chen Tao," 12-14 for another illustration.

[29] Hardyck and Braden, "Prophecy Fails Again," 138-39.

[30] Shaffir, "When Prophecy is Not Validated," 127; also Dein, "Lubavitch," 203.

[31] Takaaki, "After Prophecy Fails," 224.

[32] M. James Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed: The Story of the Jehovah's Witnesses* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 100; Singelenberg, "'It Separated the Wheat from the Chaff,'" 34.

[33] Tumminia, "How Prophecy Never Fails," 168.

[34] Ibid., 165.

[35] Balch et al., "Fifteen Years of Failed Prophecy," 79-80.

[36] For example, Melton, "Spiritualization and Reaffirmation"; van Fossen, "How Do Movements Survive Failures of Prophecy?"; Palmer and Finn, "Coping with Apocalypse in Canada"; and Tumminia, "How Prophecy Never Fails."

[37] Melton, "Spiritualization and Reaffirmation," 25.

[38] Shaffir, "When Prophecy is Not Validated" and Dein, "Lubavitch."

[39] Shaffir, "When Prophecy is Not Validated," 128.

[40] van Fossen, "How Do Movements Survive Failures of Prophecy?"

[41] Palmer and Finn, "Coping with Apocalypse in Canada," 414.

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[42] See van Fossen, "How Do Movements Survive Failures of Prophecy?" 201-04.

[43] Takaaki, "After Prophecy Fails," 227-28.

[44] For example, Festinger et al., *When Prophecy Fails*; Takaaki, "After Prophecy Fails"; Balch et al., "When the Bombs Drop"; Singelenberg, "'It Separated the Wheat from the Chaff'"; and Palmer and Finn, "Coping with Apocalypse in Canada."

[45] See the fascinating chapter on the Lubavitch use of the Internet in Jeffrey Zaleski, *The Soul of Cyberspace* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 8-26.

[46] Zygmunt, "When Prophecies Fail," 258.

[47] Palmer and Finn, "Coping with Apocalypse in Canada," 412-13; see also Melton, "Spiritualization and Reaffirmation," 28.

[48] Singelenberg, "'It Separated the Wheat from the Chaff.'"

[49] See Zygmunt, "When Prophecies Fail"; Balch et al., "When the Bombs Drop"; Melton, "Spiritualization and Reaffirmation"; Singelenberg, "'It Separated the Wheat from the Chaff'"; Shaffir, "When Prophecy is Not Validated"; and Dein, "Lubavitch."

[50] See Zygmunt, "When Prophecies Fail," 251.

[51] Balch et al., "When the Bombs Drop," 153.

[52] Singelenberg, "'It Separated the Wheat from the Chaff,'" 35-36.

[53] Melton, "Spiritualization and Reaffirmation," 19.

[54] Ibid.

[55] See van Fossen, "How Do Movements Survive Failures of Prophecy?" 196-97.

[56] These conditions are as follows (*When Prophecy Fails*, 4):

1. A belief must be held with deep conviction and it must have some relevance to action, that is, to what the believer does or how [they] behave.

2. The person holding the belief must have committed [themselves] to it; that is, for the sake of [their] belief, [they] must have taken some important action that is difficult to undo . . .

3. The belief must be sufficiently specific and sufficiently concerned with the real world so that events may unequivocally refute the belief.

4. Such undeniable disconfirmatory evidence must occur and must be recognized by the individual holding the belief.

5. The individual believer must have social support. It is unlikely that one isolated believer could withstand the kind of disconfirming evidence we have specified. If, however, the believer is a member of a group of convinced persons who can support one another, we would expect the belief to be maintained and the believers to attempt to proselytize or to persuade nonmembers that the belief is correct.

These conditions are important to an assessment of the theoretical value of the Festinger prediction. They can be used, however, to devise sensible explanations or excuses for why some religious groups either do not engage in increased proselytizing after the disconfirmation of their prophecy or disband altogether. In many cases it is a matter of interpretation whether any of these five conditions apply, let alone all of them. Obversely, it would be more accurate to say that even the studies claiming to have falsified the Festinger thesis, like Hardyck and Braden's study of the Church of the True Word, actually are just pointing to ways in which these five conditions need to be modified to make the theory work. The conditions set by Festinger et al. are better read as variable features of groups coping with prophetic failure that can combine in different ways with different results.

[57] See, for example, Hardyck and Braden, "Prophecy Fails Again"; Singelenberg, "'It Separated the Wheat from the Chaff'"; Palmer and Finn, "Coping with Apocalypse in Canada"; and Balch et al., "Fifteen Years of Failed Prophecy."

[58] Balch et al. , "Fifteen Years of Failed Prophecy," 82.

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[59] Singelenberg, "'It Separated the Wheat from the Chaff,'" 35; James A. Beckford, *The Trumpet of Prophecy: A Sociological Study of Jehovah's Witnesses* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975), 220; James M. Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed: The Story of the Jehovah's Witnesses* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 95.

[60] Zygmunt, "When Prophecies Fail," 251-57.

[61] As indicated in Balch et al., "Fifteen Years of Failed Prophecy."

[62] Hardyck and Braden, "Prophecy Fails Again," 140-41.

[63] Palmer and Finn, "Coping with Apocalypse in Canada," 409.

[64] Ibid., 410.

[65] Tumminia, "How Prophecy Never Fails," 166-67.

[66] Melton, "Spiritualization and Reaffirmation," 28.

[67] Some systematic consideration of these issues can be found in van Fossen, "How Do Movements Survive Failures of Prophecy?"

[68] As reflected, for example, by Wright's study of the Chen Tao group. Another interesting possibility is presented by the Concerned Christians, a group who recently hit the headlines worldwide after leaving their homes in Denver, Colorado, to await the Second Coming of Christ in Jerusalem. The leader of the Concerned Christians, Monte Kim Miller, had prophesied Christ's return by the year 2000 after his own death and resurrection in Jerusalem. Fearing some violent actions, fourteen members were deported from Israel in January of 1999.

[69] Zygmunt, "When Prophecies Fail," 5.

[70] Ibid.; van Fossen, "How Do Movements Survive Failures of Prophecy?"; Palmer and Finn, "Coping with Apocalypse in Canada."

[71] See Prus, "Religious Recruitment and the Management of Dissonance" and Dunsford and Kunz, "The Neutralization of Religious Dissonance."

[72] Balch et al., "Fifteen Years of Failed Prophecy."

[73] Prus, "Religious Recruitment and the Management of Dissonance," 133.

[74] Armand Mauss and David Petersen, "The Cross and the Commune: An Interpretation of the Jesus People," in *Social Movements*, ed. R. Evans (Chicago: Rand-McNally, 1973), 150-70; Dunford and Kunz, "The Neutralization of Religious Dissonance"; Prus, "Religious Recruitment and the Management of Dissonance."

[75] Prus, "Religious Recruitment and the Management of Dissonance," 127.

[76] For example, Snow and Machalek, "On the Presumed Fragility of Unconventional Beliefs"; Melton, "Spiritualization and Reaffirmation"; van Fossen, "How Do Movements Survive Failures of Prophecy?"; and Balch et al., "Fifteen Years of Failed Prophecy."

[77] Snow and Machalek, "On the Presumed Fragility of Unconventional Beliefs," 23.

[78] An additional article on the failure of prophecy has been published since this paper was accepted for publication: Chris Bader, "When Prophecy Passes Unnoticed: New Perspectives on Failed Prophecy," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 1 (1999): 119-31. Bader seeks to apply two propositions derived from the "rational choice" theorizing of Rodney Stark, William Sims Bainbridge, Laurence Iannaccone, and Roger Finke to a handful of the case studies treated here and to his own observations of a UFO center. The results are promising, but as yet inconclusive. A comparative analysis of the results of our two papers could prove useful. On first appraisal, it appears that the wider sampling of the existing literature undertaken here points to some limitations in the applicability of Bader's propositions (at least as presently formulated). But his attempt theoretically to integrate the diffuse research has real merits and is to be applauded.

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